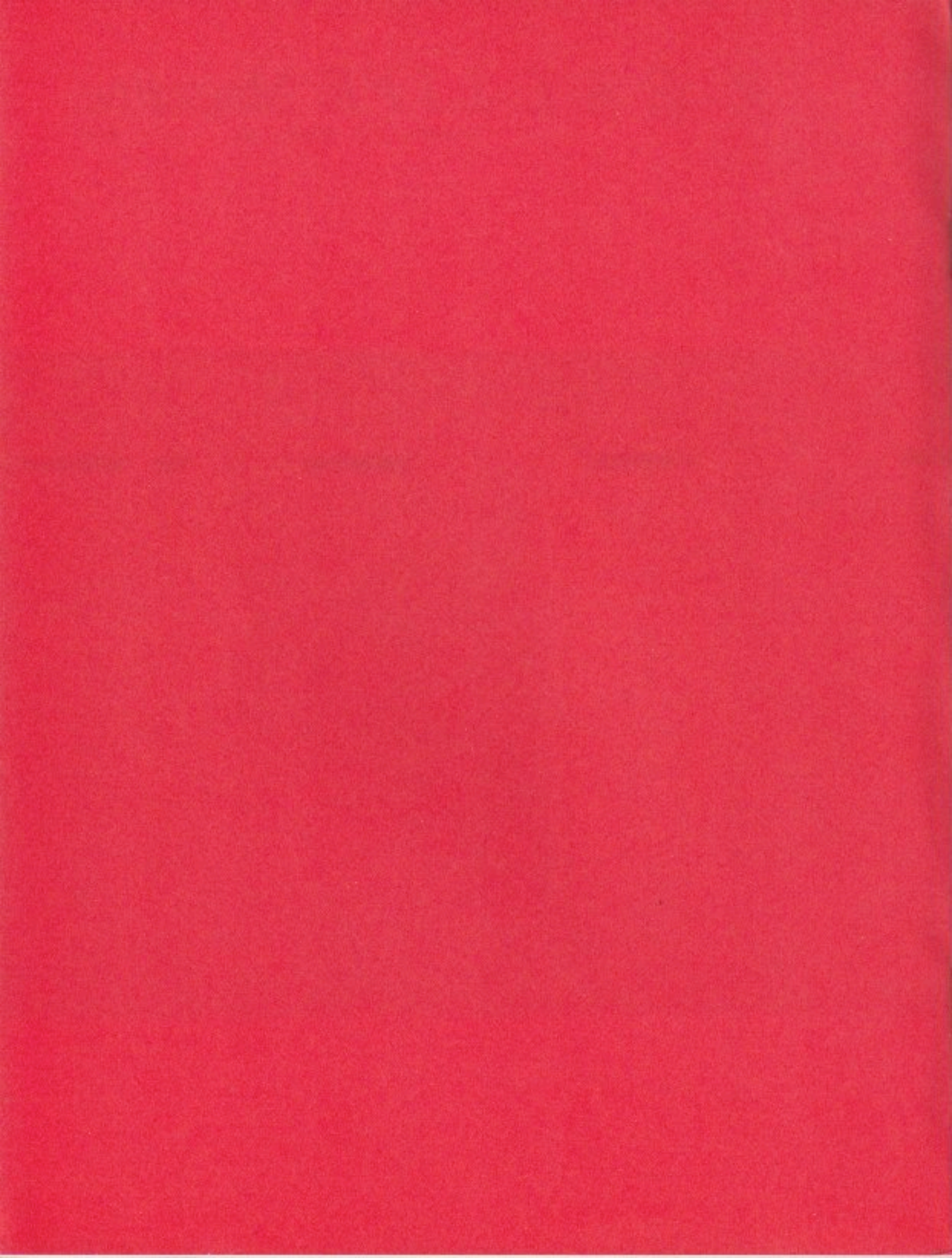


# *R E A L L I F E* Magazine

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# REAL LIFE Magazine

Number 11/12, Winter 1983/84

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# KOMAR & MELAMID

an interview  
by Thomas Lawson

**THOMAS LAWSON:** Like it or not you have been taken up as prime examples of 'good' political artists.

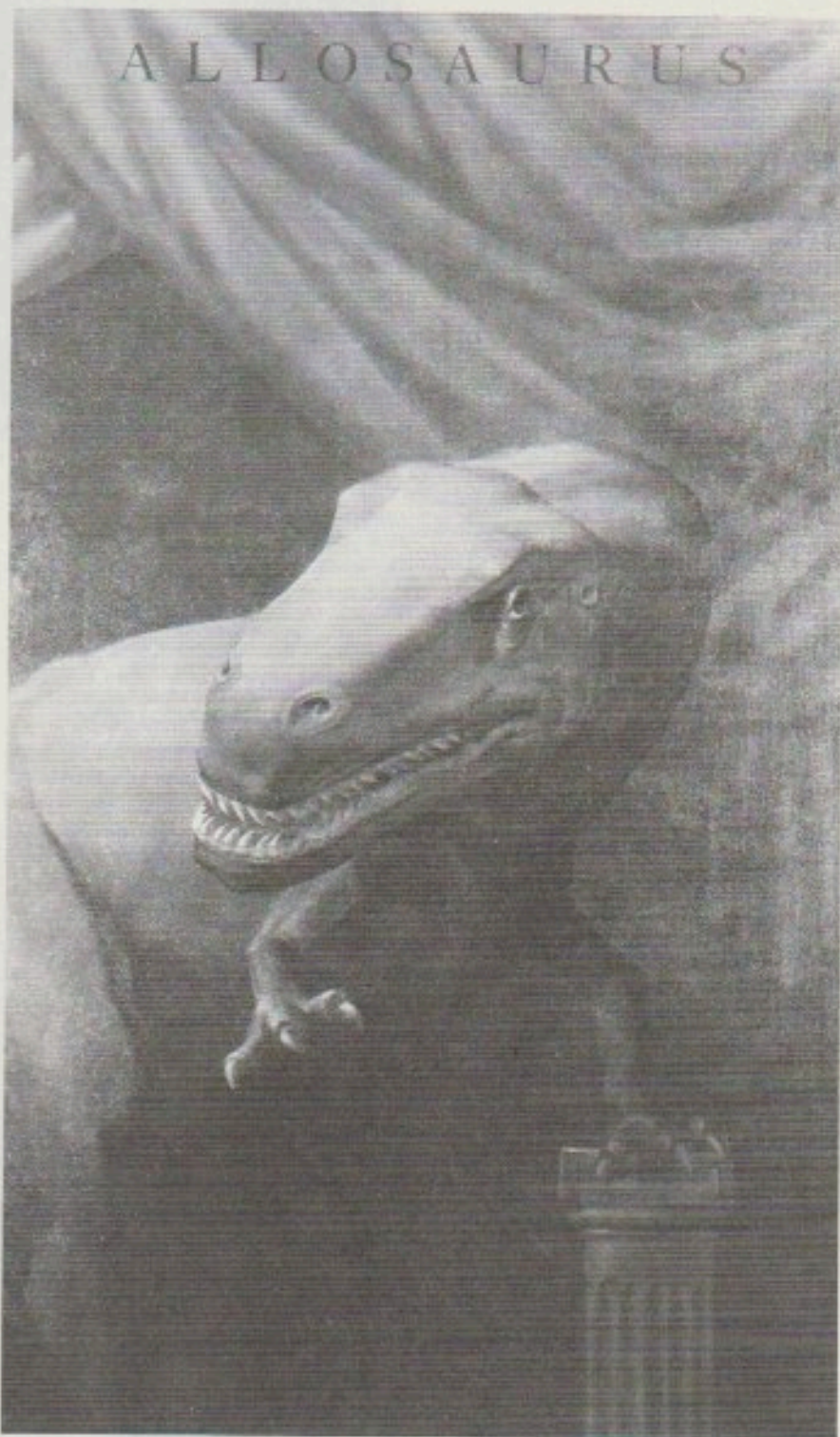
**ALEKSANDR MELAMID:** As far as I understand it we never did political art. Politics as I understand it is the moment, what is Reagan doing now, something like that. Hans Haacke may be a political artist. But we never use this kind of politics, although we might use political figures in a piece.

**VITALI KOMAR:** Don't say 'we', because I might think something different.

**AM:** OK. I use some political figures, because art is an account of history. We know history by figures, by names, mostly political names—Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Stalin, Khrushchev. But from my point of view we are not making political art about Napoleon, for example.

**TL:** When J.-L. David painted a portrait of Napoleon he was making one kind of political art, an unusually direct piece of propaganda. Most art is not this direct. And when you paint a picture of Hitler in a grand style you indicate that. It is the inappropriateness of your appropriations that make them such useful antidotes to all sorts of propaganda.

**AM:** I think our work is about history, and about histories. There is an historical web of stories, and as I said these stories are usually identified by names. We use names to point to time not politics. Stalin for us is a period of time, our personal time, private time. When we want to talk about when we were kids, we find that the best way to mark the time for us is Stalin. That is the mark of the time—if you want to depict 1950, the simplest way is to depict Stalin. That doesn't cover everything of



Komar and Melamid: Ancestral Portrait: Allosaurus, 1990.

course, but for us it is the most all encompassing.

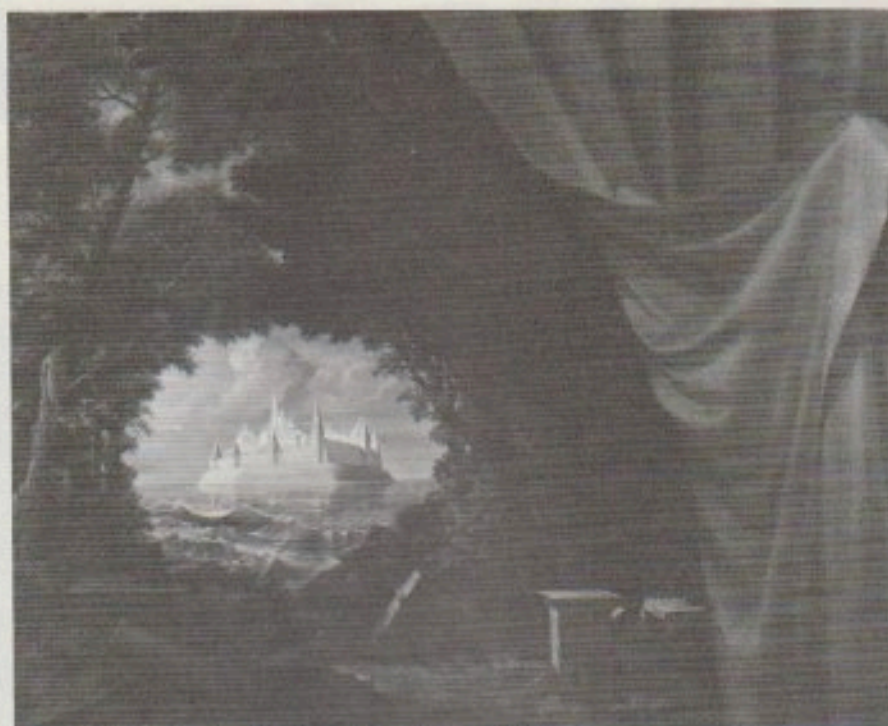
**TL:** But surely Stalin's imprint stretches a little farther than 1950. You are talking about a tremendously personal identification, conflating an historical moment with your first memories. How old were you then?

**AM:** Five. I was born in 1945. Perhaps it is a Russian idea, but I think we know ourselves through a litany of names. We mark history, and our private histories by a succession of names, political mostly, but not always.

**VK:** But Stalin was not just of the Fifties, he was the Thirties too. We have to remember what Marx said, which was that we see history in relation to our present political position. We see the same thing in art. When Pollock was working he believed he was painting the moment, catching the immediate; now we see these things as period pieces to be used only in quotation.

**TL:** So you are interested in a kind of archeology, a digging up of fragments, a re-presentation of meaningful bits and pieces of powerful images—Lenin, Stalin, Hitler. Your Dinosaur series is interesting here because that was the first series you made using the idea of neo-classical 'history painting'—a dinosaur itself—as a vehicle for your nostalgic images of power. What you did was to choose an older form in which power has represented itself, a form which had apparently been demolished by modernism. I say apparently because there seems to be a revival going on. A lot of the new expressionistic painters seem to be interested in reinstituting the gesture of history painting as an important cultural artifact, and a very conservatively directed gesture at that.

**AM:** Ah sure, what we wanted to do is to reopen the question of modernism. The modernist aesthetic is based



Komar and Melamid: View of the Kremlin in a Romantic Landscape, 1981-82.

on personal feelings, let's say. There is a politics in this art because it depicts the moment, the time in which the painting is produced. An hour in history. I'm talking about intention, artistic intention, which operates in a time that is different from the personal and different from a larger history.

The problem we have set ourselves in our art is the problem of thinking about different strands of time at the same time. There is the time taken to do the painting, the time depicted by the image, and the time referred to by the style we use, and finally the time the viewer takes to unravel all these. The modernist wanted to simplify this matter, but the problem for him now is that modernism now has a history, and now Pollock, as Vitali says, is a part of the Fifties. And when modernism sinks in time it has been lost. These new expressionists are conservative modernists intentionally repeating something that was done before. They can't depict their feelings directly, because there is the problem that it looks like someone else's feelings. It is a very difficult situation now, very unstable. A lot of artists are trapped in the problem of time, and in danger of being no more than a joke.

**VK:** Maybe it is we who do not have enough time. Alex says that the contemporary expressionist does not

have his own time because we remember the time when it was done before. But maybe we have not given it enough time. Maybe it is our mistake, maybe contemporary expressionists are much more different from the first expressionists than we think now. I think the biggest contradiction of our time is that between the avant garde and modernism. Most of this century these two ideas were more or less the same, but now they are not. From what I understand the avant garde is that which stands in opposition to accepted taste, and so now traditionalism can play the role of the avant garde. So now we witness an interesting phenomenon, the beginning of a contradiction between modernism and the avant garde. I feel myself to be an avant gardist, but not a modernist. That's a very important position right now—like Khomeini, or as Mussolini was, a revolutionary against Communism.

**TL:** So you're aligning yourself with Mussolini?

**VK:** I think traditionalism is now playing the role of the avant garde.

**TL:** I think a further contradiction is that we appear to be suffering from too much history. We have an old history, the humanist history taught at traditional schools, a modernist history, and the two conflated. And so

to be a traditionalist now can mean a number of things; you can be a traditional traditionalist, a traditional modernist, or a modern traditionalist.

**VK:** I mean the tradition before modernism, if you continue in the tradition of modernism you can't be anti-modern.

**AM:** A Russian philosopher said that the history of Europe is a history of self destruction, and of the struggles of peoples against that. I think modernism was such a struggle. It was a struggle against everything, against history itself. The modernists tried to get out of history, to jump out of it, stop it because it was too much, it was such a burden. And the history of modernism has proved that tactic impossible. They couldn't do it, they became part of history—the beginning of a tradition of last pictures.

**TL:** So when you say you are anti-modern that is what you mean.

**AM:** Of course anti modernism was Socialist Realism, historically.

**TL:** But here we have a contradiction. You say that modernism was an attempt to stop history, but you have also both written that Socialist Realism was an attempt to freeze history.

**VK:** Because it was the same socialist idea dressed in different forms. Stalin said that you have to present a socialist content in many forms. It is not so much a struggle between ideas, it's a struggle of forms. And this ultimately means it was a struggle for money. In the beginning the modernists got a lot of power in the State—support from the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of War, and so on—and the Realists had to struggle to live. It was a real struggle for a real thing, and the Realists finally won, with Stalin.

**AM:** And remember that in Russia at that time, and in Germany, this is the

early Twenties, it was a period of revolution, of destruction and new beginnings. And so the modernists were perfect artists of revolution. Lenin said that we must destroy so that we can build. But then later from the point of view of the State it became clear that enough had been destroyed, that they should start to build something—reimpose the kind of art and culture that had been destroyed.

**TL:** But weren't the Constructivists trying to build a new culture to replace the old one?

**AM:** Yes, but their main idea was destruction. It was an aesthetic based on destruction.

It's interesting though, I just saw John Russell's article in the *New York Times* on the new painting. He says that what is so good about the new European painting is that it is powerful, and we need power. That is an old tune. Power! We have a lot of artists trying to revive the idea of being modern. But it is so romantic. And romantic ideas have power.

**TL:** To paraphrase the old Marxist saw you are so fond of, the Constructivists toyed with the idea of destruction and this led to tragedy, and we are now seeing a new generation playing with similar ideas, breaking plates and so on, but it is now merely farce. It seems that we are finding ourselves more and more in a tragi-comic situation, and not just in art. We have a situation that is so grave that all we can do is to crack a few jokes.

**AM:** Sure. Don't be afraid to be funny. That's the trouble with Schnabel and those artists, they are afraid to be funny. They try to be like Michelangelo no less, and that is why their work is really funny.

**TL:** It is your willingness to risk being funny that marks you as non-modernist I think. Modernism is rarely funny.

**AM:** But there are always two points of view. From the point of view of the public, modernism is a huge joke.

**VK:** One of the first modernists was Daumier and he was a revolutionary comic, someone who was able to advance both form and content, and in a highly politicised way. And when you look at some of the first expressionists that too is very funny, so much of it is done to the formulas of cartoons. It could be called cartoonism. The contemporary expressionists are the same, they are cartoonists—Futura 2000, Haring, Salome—cartoons, cartoons.

But people lose their sense of humour, they begin to take it seriously. Lichtenstein is an example. At first he seemed so funny and cruel. When I first knew his work we were trying to do something similar in Russia, political cartoons. But when I saw his big show at the Whitney I was disappointed, he has become so decorative.

**TL:** Well there is some pressure that if you want to be taken seriously as an artist then you must start to make serious looking work. The artist must begin to appear to be 'mature'.

**VK:** But I still can't understand it. You know Goya started out very light and whimsical and ended dark, and I understand this evolution. But Lichtenstein has lost everything. He started light and ended weightless. It is a cynical progression, but maybe not cynical enough.

**TL:** Do you think your work is cynical?

**AM:** Sure, we have no real convictions, no real beliefs, only criticisms. Everything is provisional. We reserve the right to change our minds. What we have said here is only good for today, you can't hold us to it. Another day we may say something different.

May 20, 1983